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Former agents divided on CIA role in Southeast Asia

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LOS ANGELES — Three former agents for the CIA disagreed yesterday about the effectiveness of the agency in Vietnam and about its current role in Southeast Asia.

Frank Snepp, strategy analyst for the CIA in Saigon during the mid-70s, argued that the agency did a creditable job in Vietnam, while John Stockwell and Ralph McGehee argued it did not. All three were speaking at the "Vietnam Reconsidered" seminar at the University of Southern California.

Snepp, who said the CIA now is working with the Chinese and Thais in support of Cambodian rebels, including the deposed Pol Pot regime, explained, "We're giving them modest aid and letting the Chinese carry the initiative."

In addition, "we're heavily involved in Afghanistan," said Snepp, "and, of course, Honduras."

To carry out these operations, he said, the CIA is drawing on its Vietnam experience, "which was to modern intelligence gathering what the Spanish Civil War was to World War II: a proving ground."

Snepp pointed out that his remarks at yesterday's conference had been censored by the CIA before being presented.

He said that early in the Vietnam War the North Vietnamese had two distinct advantages: knowing the American cryptographic system (sold by an Army enlisted man to the Soviets in 1963) and the destination of B-52 raids out of Guam (picked up from cockpit conversations by Soviet trawlers off the coast of the island).

In addition, it is now suspected that the counterintelligence chief for the South Vietnamese in the last years of the war "was a North Vietnamese agent," said Snepp.

The CIA countered by infiltrating the communist cadre system, said

Snepp, and by 1968 it was able to name every major communist commander in the south, as well as predict every major military push.

By 1964 the CIA had repudiated the domino theory, a legacy of Allen Dulles, said Snepp, "but by then it was too late."

The CIA also issued a study on American bombing in 1966 which offered "unremitting gloom," Snepp explained. The CIA stand was "that unless the bombing is extended to every conceivable target," including dikes and rice paddies, the North Vietnamese could withstand any escalation.

Village defense systems set up by the CIA met with some success, added Snepp, and the Phoenix operation, the targeting and removal of communist cadres, though extreme, devastated Viet Cong ranks.

But then Richard Helms became CIA chief and cut the CIA's count of communist forces in Vietnam in half, buckling to pressure from the Pentagon, Snepp stated.

"The spring Tet offensive in 1968 was carried out with the very force the Pentagon had refused to acknowledge," he added.

Where the CIA went wrong, Snepp said, was in believing reports from corrupt Vietnamese officials and in the effectiveness of the underground campaign against the communists.

Resolution 9 and other defeatist NVA papers after Tet led to "an over-optimism" about Saigon's strength, he said, an optimism bolstered by South Vietnamese officials who were telling agents what they wanted to hear.

The CIA repeated the mistake of believing government officials about the stability of their own government in Iran, just before the shah was toppled, Snepp said.

Because of its gloomy reports (compared with Pentagon statements), the CIA was kept in the dark about overall strategy in Vietnam, Snepp suggested.

Only on the eve of the U.S. push into Cambodia and the South Vietnamese drive into Laos was the CIA in Saigon informed, he said.

Snepp argued that the lesson of Vietnam was, "Don't pamper the host government — don't ply its propaganda. Ultimately the only one you fool is yourself."

McGehee, a 25-year veteran of the CIA, said the CIA knew full well what it was doing, arguing that "disinformation is the primary function of the agency and the American people are the primary target of that."

McGehee insisted that the Viet Minh had the support of 80 percent of the population as early as the late 1950s (using the Viet Minh's own figures), and that there was a consistent effort to downplay the growth of communism in Southeast Asian villages and cities.

Stockwell, who served as a CIA field officer in Vietnam, is also an author of a CIA expose book, as are McGehee and Snepp. But he took the most militant anti-CIA stand, saying, "I personally would close the CIA down from what I've seen."

Pointing to Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cambodia and Indonesia, Stockwell blamed the CIA for half a million deaths. Add the Vietnam War, he stated, and the total passes 2 million.

"As I speak there are 10 covert actions going on in the world," said Stockwell, although he declined to name them.

Snepp took exception to the anti-CIA statements from McGehee and Stockwell, asking McGehee why he stayed in for 25 years if the agency was so blatantly dishonest.

McGehee answered that he had four children and could not afford to leave. He also said he would have had no way to protest CIA actions once he left the agency.